ECO-SOCIALISM

From deep ecology
to social justice

David Pepper

London and New York

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Capitalism continues to degrade ecosystems and create social injustice. The 1992 Earth Summit demonstrated that the powerful vested interests behind Western capitalism have no intention of radically changing their goals and methods to help create an environmentally sound or socially just global society. In order to confront this, the green movement must now develop a coherent eco-socialist politics. People must control their own lives and their relationship with their environment.

Drawing on Marx, Morris, Kropotkin and anarcho-syndicalism, David Pepper presents a provocatively anthropocentric analysis of the way forward for green politics and environmental movements. Establishing the elements of a radical eco-socialism, the book rejects biocentrism, simplistic limits to growth and overpopulation theses, whilst exposing the deficiencies and contradictions in green approaches to postmodern politics and deep ecology.

Eco-Socialism will provide students of ecology, politics and the environment with a thorough introduction to the ideologies of Marxism, anarchism and deep ecology, and how these can be synthesised into a radical green politics.

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To Nickie

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FOREWORD

I finished the penultimate draft of this book just as the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro closed. Jonathon Porritt, that most public of British green spokespeople, declared that he had gone to the summit with low expectations and had them all met! This book sets out, among other things, some reasons why Porritt was indeed wise to have low expectations.

Many other greens, however, declared their disappointment at the Summit's meagre outcomes. This must mean that they somehow expected the world's richest nations to sacrifice a substantial part of their riches and, more significantly, the means of obtaining them, to help the poorest nations to protect the environments which they now have to destroy in order to survive and develop in the world economic system. We should all, however, appreciate that being capitalist nations, the USA, the EC, Japan and the like *cannot* do this in any serious and permanent way without ceasing to be what they are. Marxist analysis reveals why this is so, and it also suggests how best to think about change towards radically alternative economic and social arrangements, of the kind which the concept of a truly commun(al)ist 'sustainable development' demands.

There are many other things about Marxism which greens may find useful and interesting, and I attempt to outline them here. I also describe the influence which anarchism has had on present green political philosophy, and I suggest what elements of this influence should be retained and what should be discouraged. The aim is to outline an *eco-socialist* analysis that offers a radical, socially just, environmentally benign – but fundamentally anthropocentric – perspective on green issues.

For I think that this is what the green movement now needs, rather than its current 'biocentric' and politically diffuse approach, in order to appeal to the concerns of the many who are still alienated by or indifferent to it. Furthermore, and pragmatism aside, I think it important not to allow our concern for non-human nature to become a substitute for, or a priority over, concern about people. Some greens believe that we should protect and respect nature for its 'intrinsic worth', whatever that is, rather than its worth for (all) people. I am not comfortable about this. Social justice, I think, or the

increasingly global lack of it, is the most pressing of all environmental problems. And the Summit showed clearly that attaining more social justice is the *prerequisite* for combating ozone depletion, global warming and the rest.

All this is the political message of the book. However preaching is not its main purpose. That is to explain as lucidly as possible what Marxism and anarchism are about, and what is their relevance to some of the most pressing political issues which the green movement raises.

It is mainly intended for students in various disciplines, and for all interested but not particularly academic people in and around the green movement. It aims to synthesise and represent clearly the views of Marxists, anarchists and others who may not have written primarily for such an audience. It arose out of my attempts to prepare a substantially revised new edition of *Roots of Modern Environmentalism*. Having surveyed my profuse notes, collected since the first edition was published, I surmised that I would probably need about a third of a million words to say all that I needed to, and that (quite unreasonably) the publisher would not let me have them! This, then, constitutes my further reflections on just the sixth and seventh chapters of that book.

It does not set out to achieve the same breadth or scope as *Roots*. For one thing, it assumes that readers already know something of the concerns and approaches of ecocentrism (as set out briefly in *Roots* or very fully in Andrew Dobson's excellent book on *Green Political Thought*). For another, it does not intend to chart comprehensively all the possible roots of political ecology and ecological politics (other recent books have done this), but to concentrate on Marxism and anarchism. And within these boundaries there are further limitations. For instance the Marxist economic theory is sketched out in its basics only, although I concede that a major and urgent task of eco-socialism is to grasp the nettle that the green movement has often avoided and get to grips with the *details* of a green socialist political economy. And, in discussing agents and actors in radical eco-socialist change, I assert the continuing importance of a (world) proletariat, but do not get round to the also-important issue of where the self-employed or the managerial classes might fit in any collective radical movement. Furthermore the book is overwhelmingly about theory, whereas a much slimmer volume with feasible suggestions about what to *do* might contribute so much more. And where, I hear readers ask, is the discussion of 'a feminist perspective' which is becoming almost mandatory for this sort of book?

I confess that I would like the book not to have these and other shortcomings, which are certainly not the fault of those whose help I acknowledge below. Out of the range of possible excuses, I am not sure which to select. Insufficient space? I think I prefer the one about merely intending to suggest *some possible* items on an *agenda* for future discussion. However, the truth is that I have still got a lot to learn and think out. But then so has everyone else in and around the green movement.

I learned something through writing *Roots*, which was better received and more widely used than I had expected. But some green critics hated its Marxist leanings. I hope that I can win them over by this fuller and, I hope, more satisfying account, and that it will help us all to sharpen up our thinking – and our act – in the face of the continuing stubborn refusal of the green millennium to appear over the horizon (the 'new world order' having shown itself to be merely a new order of exploitation of people and nature).

I thank the following for their help, either in supplying material, or in criticising part of the text or simply in encouraging me to think critically about particular ideas which have subsequently featured in the book: Adam Buick, Dave Elliot, Nickie Hallam, Jim O'Connor, Phil O'Keefe, Chris Park, Richard Peet, Graham Purchase, Biff Shore and Frank Webster. And I am glad to have been able to listen to many recordings of the discussion meetings of the Socialist Party of Great Britain. I have found them informative and challenging; the people who make them available do a considerable service, and I recommend them to readers who want to find out about socialism from socialists rather than just from more detached and less exciting academic textbooks.

The latter part of Chapter 4.4 originally appeared as an article in *The Raven*, 1(4), March 1988, and Chapter 2.3 is taken from an article forthcoming in the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*.

David Pepper, Oxford 1992

1

RED AND GREEN: OLD OR NEW POLITICS?

1.1 THE RED–GREEN DEBATE

Ten years ago, a friend asked me to address a local Friends of the Earth meeting which he was organising. My interest was in the historical roots of green philosophy, so I regaled my audience with accounts of William Morris, Peter Kropotkin and the like. Naively, I mentally prepared myself to receive accolades in the ensuing discussion for drawing such historical links. Instead I sensed antipathy mingled with hostility from some. They were disappointed. Had I not realised that what the greens were saying had never been said before? Did I not appreciate its distinctiveness from conventional politics?

I had offended a fundamental aspect of green psyche, which holds that ecologism really is about a new world order, and a new 'politics of life' (to use the Green Party slogan). I compounded this crime by suggesting, in *Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, that greens needed to assimilate Marxist perspectives into their analysis. This was a red rag in the face of a green bull, being dismissed as 'just so much angry spluttering from worn-out ideologues who have lost touch with the real world' (Porritt and Winner 1988, 256).

Notwithstanding this familiar criticism, I, a clapped-out ideologue and aspiring member of that 'malign force', the Marxist left (Porritt and Winner, p. 220), intend to splutter on unabashed. I will try, in the following pages, to extend and deepen the recent debate between the red and green positions on our 'ecological crisis'. This is because I do not accept Adrian Atkinson's dismissal of this debate as a mere 'argument' between two views that, in practice, display no fundamental contradiction.

True, there are many conjunctions between red–greens and green–greens (these terms both describe *radical* ecologists, or 'ecocentrics' as opposed to 'light' greens or 'environmentalists', i.e. technocentrics, who are not the subject of this book – see Chapter 2). If red–greens make much use of Marxism, however, green–greens are more indebted to anarchism. And although the two often conflate in the anarcho-communism of the likes of Kropotkin, elements of which form a template for modern ecotopias, and for the social ecology of

Murray Bookchin, there are also significant – potentially irreconcilable – differences between them.

This is important, in these days of tentative radical alliances and red–green networks, for reasons which Tony Benn gave (cited in Porritt and Winner, p. 69):

> Until the basic principles of socialism are re-established (equity, democracy, accountability, internationalism and morality), one cannot build non-opportunistic, genuine relations with movements which are themselves divided over the primacy of these principles.

I think it is time we had the whole thing out, and this book intends to contribute to that process – a process which is of more than just academic importance. For Western capitalism is yet again in crisis, and more than ever before the effects of the crisis extend across the world. At the same time that recession and retrenchment have decimated manufacturing industry in the old heartlands, and people stubbornly refuse to consume their way out of slump, capitalism's response has been to reach ever deeper into second and third worlds for markets and sources of cheap labour and materials.

The current search for a new, more 'liberal' General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) signifies an attempt to bring everyone unambiguously into the global capitalist economy. This threatens a further mushrooming of what neither socialists nor greens want – the hedonistic consumer society with a high throughput of goods but a low output of human fulfilment. In it, disenfranchised and underprivileged groups are increasingly economically marginalised and the environmental costs of the search for profits mount. But these twin evils of social injustice and environmental degradation will continue to grow, even though most people recognise them as evils, for there is no prospect that their present root causes in the economics and politics of capitalism will be radically examined and tackled. The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro made this plain. For while some third world leaders and other eminent public figures correctly identified the problems and their causes, Western leaders staunchly defended the 'right' of multinational capital to continue operating in the same old way and resurrected old Malthusian (third world) 'overpopulation' canards for their explanations of causes. Faced with draft global accords, conventions and other agreements to take fundamental action on social and environmental problems they watered them down, prevaricated and even refused point blank to sign them. Or, more dishonestly, they did so and then went home and carried on with the same old policies.

It is at times like these that the left and the greens anticipate that they will make their mark most effectively. Yet this has not happened. The almost world-wide disarray of the left in the 1980s is well documented. But the greens, who promised us a 'new politics' to replace both socialism and capitalism, have also been on the retreat. Electoral gains made in Europe in the early 1980s have been substantially relinquished – indeed the British Green Party faces

crisis at the very time of writing, with the resignation of half its executive council and a fall in membership from nearly 20,000 in 1990 to 10,000 in 1992 (*The Times*, 28 August 1992).

Since, then, the pragmatic, 'realist', but anodyne politics of social democracy, democratic socialism and green reformism have failed to mount a serious threat to the status quo; more radical socialists and greens argue afresh that what is needed is the much more fundamental politics of *eco-socialism*. And yet, for all the exploratory red–green 'networking' that goes on, no very potent, effective and coherent eco-socialism has emerged. I think that this is because of the fact that to bring together red and green you have, effectively, to unite socialism with anarchism – the traditional political philosophy which more than any other informs the green movement. This is not as easy as it sounds, because, contrary to popular misconception, it is not always possible to regard anarchism as just another form of socialism. This book tries to help the cause of eco-socialist politics by describing and explaining the forms of socialism – particularly Marxist socialism – and anarchism on which they must be based. It highlights and clarifies many of the differences between socialism and anarchism in order to suggest the agenda for any future political discourse which wants to close the gap and create eco-socialism as a more vital force. It does this by suggesting that greens should make more of an accommodation with reds by dropping those aspects of their anarchism that are more akin to liberal and postmodern politics. At the same time reds should accommodate with greens by reviving those traditions in socialism which I describe and review here – including traditions of decentralism and of the society–nature dialectic, along with some resuscitation of orthodox Marxism's materialism and emphasis on rediscovering our power as producers.

The main part of the book maintains, in Chapter 3, that Marxist perspectives have more to offer greens than just an incisive analysis of capitalism, important as this is. Marxism suggests a dialectical view of the society–nature relationship, which is not like that of ecocentrics or technocentrics, and challenges both of them. It has a historical materialist approach to social change, which ought to inform green strategy. And it is committed to socialism, as Benn defines it above. And, yes, it is, and I am, anthropocentric enough to insist that nature's rights (biological egalitarianism) are meaningless without human rights (socialism). Eco-socialism says that we should proceed to ecology from social justice and not the other way around.

Many greens (e.g. Schumacher 1973) have said that Marxism is rigid, inflexible, deterministic, mechanistic (rather than organic), overly 'scientific' (in the positivist sense) about history, lacking humanism and a spiritual dimension, a 'bible' consisting of a set of prophecies which are mostly wrong, and totalitarian in outlook and implications.

What I have read about Marxism suggests that these criticisms are often partly or wholly inaccurate. What follows may illustrate this, although it is not intended as an apologia for Marxism's shortcomings. As Sarkar (1983, 164)

says: 'The point is not to find out the authentic Marx . . . the purpose is not to save Marxism, but to find out the truth . . .', and, citing Ullrich (1979, 95):

> it is now time that the senseless game of substituting endless quotations from the 'holy scriptures' for the analysis of new phenomena and one's own thinking is finally given up. . . . It is, moreover, unmarxist. Marx himself did not like to be called a Marxist. Today he would certainly not be a Marxist in the sense of uncritical adherence to the contents of his over one hundred years old writings.

My second contribution, in Chapter 4, is to outline the tenets of anarchism and how much they at present inform the position of what I call 'mainstream' greens (ecocentrics) as well as those who openly call themselves 'green anarchists'. While I will not argue in the conclusion (Chapter 5) that anarchism must be abandoned, I will highlight the distinctiveness of socialism and its debt to Marxism and suggest a shift in emphasis for ecocentrics towards this latter. Some greens may say that this shift is already occurring, but I wonder if they realise its full implications; such as possibly abandoning the idea of a money-driven economy, or that of biocentrism?

Before all this, I want to set the context of the debate, in Chapters 1 and 2. Some academics, like Atkinson (1991), Bramwell (1989) or Dobson (1990, 205–6) maintain that ecologism is 'a political ideology in its own right' because 'the descriptive and prescriptive elements in the political ecology programme cannot be accommodated within other political ideologies (such as socialism) without substantially changing them . . .'. For Dobson, this distinctiveness hinges particularly upon ecologism's acceptance of limits to growth and on the bioethic (advocating respect and reverence for the intrinsic value of 'non-human' nature – in its own right and regardless of its usefulness to humans). For Atkinson (p. 19) it is ecologism's utopianism (after, particularly, utopian socialists) which makes it

> a coherent political paradigm quite distinct from the conservatism, liberalism and socialism which today are commonly seen as defining the limits of the political spectrum.

All of this is arguable. For one, few greens nowadays propose *no* forms of economic growth for the future, while the argument itself that 'resources' are finite is intellectually problematic (see Chapter 3.5). Secondly, there are all sorts of objections to intrinsic value theory for nature – its theoretical and practical implications, its indebtedness to intuition rather than rational argument, its ***impossibility*** (we cannot know if nature values ***itself***: we, as humans, can only approach nature from an anthropocentric standpoint) (Fox 1990, 184–96) and its tendency to set up a society–nature dualism (see Chapter 3.6). Thirdly, to suggest that modern politics have no utopianism may be true in the narrow sense; but their roots do. Marxism and anarchism themselves are utopian in the sense of having a vision of at least the principles of an ideal

(anarcho-socialist) society. But the former is not utopian in terms of how we go about ***changing*** society, and it justly criticises anarchists, utopian socialists and greens for being so (Chapter 3.9).

However, I do not want to pursue these objections here, and I do want to concede that the green political claim to distinctiveness, even newness, in its descriptive elements, may be accurate. Nonetheless, I consider that in their ***prescriptive*** elements: in how they propose to change and organise society, then they are often rehashing some old solutions to some very old and basic political questions. There is nothing wrong in this, but the rehash does need to be coherent, and greens widely recognise that such coherence is presently lacking. I propose that some attention to the perspectives of Marxism could lend ecologism a coherence that is appropriate for a forward, not a backward looking politics. This, together with the progressive elements of anarchism, might present green socialism as a form of socialism which is less prone to totalitarianism than some previous 'socialisms', though it will still entail sacrifice of some extant liberal 'freedoms', as is recognised in the conclusion; but this may be no bad thing.

To illustrate and emphasise that

> The political meanings attributed to 'social ecology' or 'the ecological paradigm' really derive from, and can only be discussed in terms of, traditions and debates (individualism versus collectivism, competition versus mutuality, authority and hierarchy versus liberty and equality) which long predate the emergence of ecology as a scientific discipline.
>
> (Ryle 1988, 12).

I shall begin by outlining briefly what some of these debates are about (see Table 1.1). They still largely set the fundamental political agenda for the twenty-first century, and the arrival of a green consciousness does not alter this: they form the context in which green politics are inescapably set. Marxism and anarchism have much to say about these debates.

It should be understood that the discussion in the following section, 1.2, is illustrative only. It does not purport to be an exhaustive list of all of the most important questions underlying the 'old' politics. Thus I do not debate in the abstract Ryle's authority/hierarchy versus liberty/equality dualism, or issues to do with technology (should it be 'hard' or 'soft', 'high' or 'appropriate', and does it determine social development or vice versa?) or scale (economies of scale versus small-is-beautiful) or whether the approach to politics should be reformist or radical. It may be argued that I should have done, for these questions figure centrally in modern discussions about ecology and so they inevitably figure in the anarchist as well as the Marxist discourses of Chapters 4 and 3. However, to limit the size of this chapter I have chosen some issues that do not so openly appear in green debates as such, but which, I think, ought to. I should also qualify the discussion by acknowledging that although much of it is presented in terms of conflicting dualisms, the issues are usually more

Table 1.1 Some fundamental social questions that underlie traditional and green political debates

Questions dealt with in Chapter 1:	
HUMAN NATURE:	Is there such a thing? Is it shaped by environment or genetic inheritance? Is it greedy, aggressive and competitive or the reverse?
DETERMINISM or FREE WILL:	Are individuals and society the product of external forces – God, environment, economics – or do they have freedom to shape the world how they want it to be?
IDEALISM or MATERIALISM:	Are societies and economics shaped and changed as a result of new ideas and arguments which persuade people to act differently? Or are material, especially economic, structures and events, the main influences on behaviour and ideas?
INDIVIDUALISM or COLLECTIVISM:	Will social change be triggered by the actions of individuals changing their lifestyles and thoughts (often as consumers) or by groups taking collective action for political effect (often as producers)?
GEMEINSCHAFT or *GESELLSCHAFT*:	Is society merely a collection of individuals supporting each other for mutual gain? Or is there more to society than the sum of the parts – is it an entity to which individual interests are largely subordinate?
CONSENSUS or CONFLICT:	Which of these constitute the main motor of social change? Is society a genuine democracy whose state represents an equilibrium between the interests of all groups. Or is it dominated by elites (economic or otherwise) whose interests conflict with the majority?
STRUCTURALISM:	Are social events and individual or group behaviour (surface structure) a product of deep subconscious or hidden underlying structures in the human mind or in cultural or economic organisation? Or is what we easily recognise around us the full extent of social reality?
DEVELOPMENT:	Is the social and economic development of regions and nations best described by models of environmental determinism, or structural functionalism, or structural Marxism, or modernisation or dependent development or a mix of several of those? Which development model is most ecologically preferable – independent development (bioregionalism), or socialism?
EGALITARIANISM:	Should we support economic development that produces gross maldistribution of wealth and then put up with or mitigate these effects? Or should we promote a model which does not allow inequalities to develop in the first place? Should all living species be equally respected and treated?
'FREE MARKET' or INTERVENTION:	Which produces most benefit for most people? Can social and environmental need be met without planning and intervention in the free market? Do the latter stifle innovation and produce inefficiencies?

Some other questions, that arise in Chapters 3 and 4:	
AUTHORITY or LIBERTARIANISM:	Is a peaceful, just, fulfilling and pleasant society more likely to result from one that is highly ordered and controlled through hierarchies dominated by the state or by elite groups? Or are the lack of hierarchies and a state, and the promotion of democratic self-organisation the keys to such a society?
SMALL or LARGE SCALE:	Is large-scale urban, industrial and political-economic organisation the most efficient way to achieve the desired society, or is small beautiful?
TECHNOLOGY – DETERMINED BY or DETERMINING:	Does society, or specific elements in it, control and determine technological developoment? Or does the latter have a life of its own, which substantially influences the shape of society?
TECHNOLOGY – HIGH or INTERMEDIATE:	Which serves the interests of a socially just and ecologically sound society? Can the former express and be part of democratic social relationships? Can the latter provide large populations with basic needs?
MODERNISM – POSTMODERNISM:	Is the Enlightenment project of seeking universal good through understanding and establishing general rational principles (including an absolute morality) still feasible? Or should life be lived according to hedonistic principles celebrating the here and now, images rather than reality and the equal validity of all views and perspectives?

complicated than that. Some greens may object that the very process of polarising issues in this way is part of the problem rather than the cure. Dualistic thinking, they say, underlies the 'Enlightenment Project' (i.e. all those social and political ideals and goals which evolved in the period of capitalist development, scientific discovery and philosophical advance that occurred from the seventeenth century onwards). And it is this 'project' and that dualistic thinking which has ruined us – particularly the tendency to dualise society and nature, i.e. to see them as separate and opposite. There is much in such arguments, though they are not totally convincing. Nonetheless I have found dualistic thinking a very useful pedagogic device: we can often grow towards appreciating complex and multifaceted issues by first conceiving of them in simple – even simplistic – dualisms. They give us a toehold by which we can elevate ourselves eventually to a higher understanding of complex reality. Since the prime purpose of this book is to allow students and other interested people to become familiar with the debate, then the more I can assist their learning the better.

Having established that conventional political questions are not irrelevant in green concerns, I will go on to point out, in Chapter 2, that ecologism takes positions which draw on some traditional theories concerning political economy. I will also map out how ecologism might be seen in relation to other political ideologies, including Marxism.

All this means that I must reject Atkinson's startling contention (p. 43) that 'A consistent political ecology is not the negation of any particular European intellectual tradition but of the tradition as a whole' (despite his affirmation (p. 177) that the wholesale rejection of Marxism would be a disaster). Nor can I support the postmodernist rejection of the goals of the Enlightenment Project which he seems to flirt with, alongside so many greens. Agreed, those goals, of general human progress through rationality, science, industry and social justice, must have an ecological sanity infused into them. This cannot happen under capitalism, but I doubt also that it could occur within an autarkic (i.e. decentralised), bioregional development model where all ethics and economics, apart from those towards nature, were treated as totally relative and equally valid. However, a form of Marxist socialism which, it must be conceded, has constituted a minority tradition alongside 'actually-existing' socialisms, could provide many answers in the attempt to resolve an 'ecological crisis'. It could be the key to reshaping society radically while avoiding the loss for everyone of the many benefits that have been reaped for some during the capitalist phase of the Enlightenment Project.

1.2 SOME OLD POLITICAL QUESTIONS

Human nature

Is human nature aggressive or gentle, competitive or cooperative, selfish or giving? Any answer you get is almost certain not to be scientifically valid, being ostensibly a judgement about what most humans in time and space were and are fundamentally like, yet really based on observations drawn from a pitifully small sample of people. We can never properly substantiate a view of 'universal' human nature for this reason, and also because it seems impossible to separate innate characteristics ('nature') from those acquired from the environment ('nurture').

Hence the really important question is why so many people think that answers *can* be found and are significant. Arch English conservative Peregrine Worsthorne (1984) provides a clue in his defence of social hierarchies

> which developed in England over the centuries . . . [and] gave much quiet satisfaction from top to pretty well near the bottom, since a society where everybody knows their place is much more comfortable for all concerned.

'Hierarchy', he says, 'is not unpopular in itself since it is felt to be natural, which is to say *inevitable*' (emphasis added). Here, he uses the huge power behind the idea of nature and 'naturalness' as a *legitimator*. If what *I* do and like is natural, it is just, or must be accepted even if it is not liked. Conversely, if I do not like things *you* like – such as homosexuality or egalitarianism – I can dismiss their worth by branding them as 'unnatural'.

It works both ways. Differences between our political ideologies – what we believe and why – may well rest on our different feelings at heart about the nature of human nature (Goodwin 1982). Conversely, if I want to affirm my ideology over others I will try to show that it accords with 'human nature'.

Conservatism, particularly, is legitimated by the idea of nature and the natural order. Thomas Hobbes said: Men from their very birth, and naturally, scramble for everything they covet, and would have all the world, if they could, to fear and obey them. This justified Edmund Burke in advocating social control: 'the passions of individuals should be subjected and the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted . . . by a power out of themselves'.

And 'naturalness' also justifies the irrational belief (of liberals as well as conservatives) that land should be owned as private property rather than being held in common: 'an absolute and irreducible need' instinctively 'rooted in nature' (Scruton 1980, 99 – all quotations in Coleman 1990, 8). Conservatism goes on to argue something that many greens hold dear: that nature is, or ought to be, a model for human society. Social Darwinism holds that Darwin's motor of evolution for animals and plants – competition and struggle for scarce resources leading to survival of the fittest thus enriching the whole species – can also propel human societies towards perfection. Hence the need to conserve, uninterfered with, the competitiveness and struggle of 'free market' liberal capitalism. Social Darwinists are generally oblivious to the circularity of their argument; for Darwin's evolutionary 'laws' were, self-confessedly, drawn in the first place from Thomas Malthus's and Herbert Spencer's observations of *human* society. Hence social Darwinism is really social Spencerism (Oldroyd 1980).

Modern sociobiology tends to argue this way too. Sociobiologists like Konrad Lorenz and Desmond Morris emphasise the innateness of aggression and competition, and suggest that behind the veneer of civilisation we are all selfish 'primitives'. Almost perversely, Richard Dawkins (1976) insists that even apparently altruistic acts really stem from *self*-interest, and then he is distressed when right-wing ideologues latch on to his theories.

Left-wing ideologues propose various positions. Among them is the view that nature *is*, indeed, a model for human society, but that nature is inherently *cooperative*. This was Kropotkin's celebrated theory of mutual aid (Chapter 4.3). Greens, like Capra, frequently espouse it too. Others, like Rose, Kamin and Lewontin (1984), rebut the scientific respectability of evidence for characteristics like intelligence being inherited, and argue for a Marxian dialectic between nature and nurture, in which each shapes the other.

This develops into an argument for the essential *socialness* of human nature. Human nature may therefore be moulded by moulding the social environment which produces it:

> Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most

> ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community and even to the world at large.
>
> (from Robert Owen's *A New View of Society*, cited in Coleman 1990)

William Morris, while rejecting Owen's approach of setting up 'ideal communities', nonetheless adopted a Marxian perspective on human nature – as plastic, not finalised, and therefore a product of human history (Chapter 4.3).

Atkinson (1991, 69) encapsulates the real nature of the debate about human nature:

> The English common sense assumption concerning human nature and the organisation of society necessarily embodying hierarchical relations, that emerges constantly as the essential 'discovery' of British social theory [Hobbes, Hume and the economic theory of Adam Smith] is no more than cultural prejudice reinforced by . . . cultural prejudice.

Atkinson goes on to argue that human nature is *not* a barrier to social improvement – a traditional socialist view and also a crucial one to greens, who do want radically to improve society:

> Other societies are organised around different cultural assumptions and history demonstrates regularly that change in assumptions and organisational arrangements does occur and is possible.

The question about what human nature is 'really' like, then, is not the crucial one, compared to that which asks if it can feasibly be *changed*. For greens to spend much time on the former is at best a waste of time. For instance, whether we are basically cooperative or competitive is in a way a red herring. The apparent cut-throat competition of capitalist economics is really a highly *cooperative* affair. Exploiters and exploited have to agree to occupy their roles and to accept the goals of capitalism as economic and cultural norms: as witness how 'deeply cooperative [with the bosses] sentiments ran within the postwar [US] workforce' (Harvey 1990, 133). The important questions are about the purposes to which we devote our cooperative abilities.

And there are other blind alleys in this quest for human nature. For instance, greens persist in holding up aboriginal peoples as ecologically sound 'natural societies' (e.g. the American Indian). Yet this concept of the 'noble savage' is as ideological and subject to historical fashion as that of human nature itself. People tend to find what they want to find in such 'traditional societies' (BBC 1992).

Determinism and free will

Just how free are humans to control, collectively or individually, their lives, their social and economic arrangements and their relationship with nature? This is a crucial political as well as philosophical question. As with the idea of

human nature, that of limits on human action set by supposedly external forces – e.g 'laws' of economics or history, God's design, technological progress or the physical environment – can powerfully legitimate the status quo. To say that we are *determined* by outside forces is potentially to argue that change which is out of sympathy with such forces is ill-advised if not impossible. And it can also suggest that features of society which we do not like (unemployment for instance) must be suffered because they result from forces (economic laws, world recession) beyond the control of government.

It would thus seem to be against the interests of any group wanting radical social change to support deterministic (therefore perhaps fatalistic) arguments, rather than the idea that humans can freely shape their own society – 'make their own history' in Marx's phrase. And socialists do generally shun such arguments. Greens, however, have a tradition (Goldsmith *et al.* 1972, Ekins 1986, Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1990) of accepting environmental (resource) limits as immediately circumscribing and determining human activity: hence their strictures against economic and population growth.

This is a form of environmental determinism (as opposed to the biological determinism of genetic inheritance, i.e. 'human nature'). Environmental determinism has appeared in many guises, from the Malthusian limits to growth thesis, to that of early geographers (Peet 1985) that human nature, physiognomy and national and social characteristics are more or less determined by climate, soil, relief and geographical position (still a popular notion with many people). And the view that the *built* environment controls human character and nature has strongly featured in all attempts at social engineering, from utopian socialist communities to twentieth-century urban planning and architecture.

Cornucopian technocentrics and free-market advocates often reject the limits to growth thesis (Simon and Kahn 1984), emphasising the Baconian creed that scientific knowledge equals power over nature: a power which should be used to improve humankind's lot by extending the boundaries of nature's 'limits'. In a way their arguments are equally deterministic, suggesting that humans can determine nature's form and behaviour through adequate knowledge of cause-and-effect laws governing its various components and their relationships. But in another way they can be seen as supporting the idea of freedom of human will – freedom to control an external environment. Indeed, essential corollaries of such views are that nature *is* external to, or separate from, us, and that nature is like a machine (Pepper 1984, 46–54, 117–18). Both these ideas are apparent anathema to deep ecologists.

Less materialistic Western philosophies which also emphasise human freedom of will in relation to society and nature have been developed in the last hundred or so years as phenomenology and existentialism. The science of phenomenology assumes that we are not separate from the rest of the world and are not predetermined by 'external' forces. Indeed it emphasises the way *we* shape the world: imposing structure, meaning and value onto it via our

consciousness. This is not to deny the existence of an 'objective' nature 'out there' (though more extreme idealist philosophies like that of George Berkeley and those of New Ageism did and do see matter purely as a manifestation of mental activity (Lacey 1986, 97)). But it is to suggest that this does not really matter (Warnock 1970, 26–8). *Important* knowledge of the world is knowledge of how the consciousness and intentions of individuals and groups interpret, mediate and indeed structure it. Since consciousness and perception vary between individuals and groups, this science therefore emphasises *subjective* ways of knowing the world, through intuitive understanding. Thus, how different people and cultural groups know and understand their own world of immediate experiences – their 'lifeworld' – is vital. This suggests a relativist view of knowledge, understanding and, indeed, ethics concerning how the world *should* be. It implies that the knowledges of different individuals and groups can be regarded as equally important and valid.

By extension, the individualist philosophy of existentialism says that there are no objective, external facts or laws governing our social existence, save that we are born and one day will die. We are not helpless playthings of historical forces, or social laws and codes of conduct. *We* have control and choice over most facets of our existence; not being bound by economic or social conventions. This is not to deny totally that our environment, including culture, society and economics, *conditions* our situation. But 'condition' does not mean 'determine'. So we must accept that while on one hand we have been thrown into a world which is not of our making, on the other we are free to decipher the meaning of that world for ourselves, not as interpreted by others or supposedly external factors beyond our control.

Not to recognise this is to lead an alienated and 'inauthentic' existence. But if we do recognise it we open up a horizon of possibilities, including people being made according to how they *desire* to be. This carries all sorts of implications for our relations with other people and nature. While it could be interpreted as a doctrine of selfish individualism, it does, however, argue that since we have been free to make our world, the world we experience – polluted, socially unjust – is our creation, for which we ultimately are therefore responsible.

Free-will philosophies have much political affinity with anarchism (Chapter 4.3), and they strike some chords with Marxist liberation theory (Chapter 3.7). But whereas they address the issue by exploring it in the realm of consciousness and ideas, Marxism is particularly concerned with how this realm relates to the material sphere, particularly that of production and economics. And while the focus of existentialism is the individual, Marxism is keen to emphasise how individuals are socially conditioned and materially bound (especially if they belong to the underclasses in society) and hence unable to escape alienation merely by changing personal outlook and attitude. The project of freeing the individual, as a social animal, must thus be tackled with other people.

Idealism and materialism

If radical social change is possible, how will it come; by first changing *material circumstances*, or most people's *ideas*, or both simultaneously? Where should the emphasis lie in the strategies of radical groups? Does what we think about nature condition what we do to it (White 1967), or does what we do to nature condition what we think about it (Thomas 1983, 23–5)?

An extreme idealist might claim that the world can be changed by thinking about it. If people decide, for instance, that it is a good idea to start behaving cooperatively, non-aggressively and benignly towards nature, then they can do so. If you want to change society in these directions, then you need to change attitudes and values, particularly those in the minds of people who run the institutions where we learn our values and ideologies – media and education, for instance. Thus Goldsmith (BBC 1987a), typically for greens, considers that action will change following changes in consciousness, as night follows day:

> I honestly believe that if people knew the truth about the pollution caused by nuclear power stations and the dangers of pesticide residues in their food they would not tolerate either the nuclear or the chemical industries.

An extreme materialist would argue along opposite lines. In particular, the economic organisation of society leads to particular social and economic relations between the people engaged in producing things. These in turn determine most people's ideas. Thus in days of slavery the beneficiaries – the slave owners – thought it obvious that they were more noble than their slaves; people who do well in a particular economic situation generally come to see it as being judicious and natural. So if people compete with each other (for jobs, resources, markets) and exploit nature (because this is inherent in the economic system) then these competitive, exploitative relationships will incline most people to *believe* that competition or nature exploitation are good, or common sense or 'natural', hence unavoidable. Only under different material circumstances will ideas radically incongruous with the current material basis of society become widely accepted, as distinct from being just 'countercultural' minority opinion.

Idealism, says Peet (1991, 51–2), was feudalism's finest intellectual achievement:

> Hegel's idealism connects individual consciousness with a collective and transcendent World Spirit. Movements of Spirit precede human thought and material events, in some way causing them. God 'wishes' an event to happen and moves in mysterious ways to effect it. . . . History is the evolution of an ever more perfect World Spirit.

And history today, as taught and interpreted in bourgeois cultures, is often

presented as parades of, and conflicts between, ideas – usually as articulated by 'great men'.

Marx and Engels (as spelled out in Chapter 3.2) stood this approach on its head:

> In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven . . . we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive; nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process.
>
> (Marx and Engels 1981, cited in Peet 1991, 56)

Marxian materialism, seen thus, would appear to be 'extreme', though there are those (e.g. Cuff and Payne 1981, 58) who see it as a compromise between the two extremes – arguing that new ideas and consciousness *can* change the world provided that people act on them. But the extent that people *will* act on them will be conditioned by how much they are compatible with what people already are *doing* (and thus how much the new ideas will be seen as an acceptable extension of 'common sense').

This debate – essentially about strategy – has dogged much of red–green politics. Atkinson (1991) attempts to resolve it by a further movement away from materialism (influenced perhaps by the neo-Marxist 'Frankfurt School' which distanced itself from crude or dogmatic materialism). He describes (p. 6) the capitalist economic system as a set of cultural *attitudes*, believing that humanity's coming to the 'verge of self destruction can be traced rather directly to the radical separation of the objective and the subjective' (p. 45) – i.e. the development of (Cartesian) *ideas* during the Enlightenment. You cannot over-rely on materialist explanations of social change, he says, because 'there is no material influence on life that is not mediated by ideological structures' (p. 107). And ideas do not just reflect people's material interests; they form independently in response to our aesthetic preferences as well in response to our material circumstances, because people innately search for symmetry, coherence, harmony and order in their lives. Thus, historically, countless people have stuck to their *ideas* even though to do so damaged their material interests (p. 72). So Atkinson concludes that there is a 'dialectical' interplay between actions and ideas. What we do is influenced by ideas, social structure and relations, nature, aesthetic desires, and a sense of anticipation about the future (p. 59), and none of these is more important that the others.

However, in the end Atkinson perhaps comes down on the side of idealism, as greens are wont to do (pp. 113–14), seeing religious ideas as the crucial determinant in the formation of individualism, capitalist accumulation and exploitation of nature, after Max Weber. The Puritan work ethic conditioned people continuously *to produce* material things from earth's resources, but the

simultaneous preaching of ascetic (severely abstinent) values restrained them from *consumption*. Hence came a mentality valuing *accumulation* as the ideal response to God's injunctions. This is, says Atkinson, a form of masochism, and the obverse side of it is sadism towards nature. Ecological disruption, in this view, becomes a psychosis giving rise to economic behaviour, rather than the other way round; an interpretation which has travelled so far from Marx as to be un-Marxist.

Collective or individual action?

Radical social change, achieved by confronting people's ideas or their economic organisation, means also confronting the political power of those who benefit from present arrangements. This power is so formidable that it might only be confronted by people acting *en masse* in conventional political ways, ranging from parliamentary politics to extra-parliamentary pressure group action or, more likely, revolution – withdrawing labour and/or seizing the instruments of power. All these routes favour *collective* approaches, by contrast with approaches which see all political change starting with the *individual*. According to the latter perspective, it is no good expending energy to get the masses to take political power if you yourself have not changed the way you think and live. This is because 'the personal is political' – a favourite green and feminist adage which means that all our thoughts and actions as individuals (e.g. in choosing the food we eat) have political ramifications. In a way this could be regarded as a collectivist view, because it emphasises how individuals are part of wider society. Yet in practice this implication of the adage is usually neglected in favour of the implicit suggestion that it is the individual self that has the *pivotal* role in social change. The individualist approach mistrusts mass revolution, arguing that it usually involves violence and oppression, the very things that revolution probably intended to conquer in the first place (though in the late 1980s, revolutionary changes in Eastern Europe entailed little violence). And it mistrusts party politics, arguing that the search for political power irrevocably corrupts politicians, and that political parties always have to compromise their ideals. Individualism places faith, instead, in a continuous process of individuals changing their values and lifestyles, which should then produce a new aggregate society. This concept rests on an essentially liberal view of society (see below).

In Britain, collective action for social change is most readily associated with the trades union and labour movement. But it could also imply the kind of local community politics which are effective on the European mainland, and are strongly advocated by the Green Party (Wall 1990).

However, collectivism is not fashionable in today's political climate. It is associated, says Griffiths (1990) with the establishment of the regulatory state in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, when *laissez-faire* was not regarded as a principle of sound legislation and government intervention

was seen as beneficial – even when it limited individual choice or liberty. But today, we have 'problems more serious even than those of the mid-nineteenth century', social and ecological, and although their scale is so great that

> only the authority and resources of governments can begin to solve them . . . it is our tragic misfortune that the crisis has occurred when, under the prevailing political and economic philosophy, public and collective action is denigrated. . . . The present government is . . . wholly committed to this disastrous pursuit of self-interest.

Therefore the government welcomes as solutions deregulation, privatisation and capitalist adventurism, which actually create the problems in the first place.

Society: *gemeinschaft* or *gesellschaft*?

This question, of whether individual or collective social change strategies are best, relates to a more fundamental debate about what concepts of individual, society and community actually mean and imply – a debate which helps to define traditional political ideologies. It can be approached through sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies's (1887) distinction between the ideal types *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*.

Gemeinschaft describes a social relationship founded on 'solidarity between individuals based on affection, kinship or membership of a community' (Bullock and Stallybrass 1977, 256). People have a sense of community which amounts to more than just the sum of the individual identities in it, and they explicitly or implicitly believe in their society as organic and based on unalienated face-to-face relationships. Conservatives and socialists share, at root, this ideal type. But the former go on to define it in ways that socialists do not approve of: involving hierarchy and status inequality as binding forces in the organic society, and harking back to feudalism.

Liberals, however, embrace *gesellschaft* social relations, involving 'division of labour and contracts between isolated individuals consulting their own self-interest' (Bullock and Stallybrass). Society, then, is atomised (cf. the Newtonian view of nature as composed fundamentally of individual atoms; a view which rose alongside liberal philosophy) and its totality amounts only to the sum of the individuals in it. Relationships are based on individual interests and rights, each person having equal rights to property, for instance. Maximum social good is thought to flow from individuals all seeking to maximise their own gain, after the 'invisible hand' theory of Adam Smith.

Kamenka (1982a, 8–24) describes how socialist community mores imply, after Rousseau, that the 'general will' is qualitatively different from the sum of individual wills, and the latter may have to be subordinate to the former. The general will is an expression of humanity's social, communal ***nature***. To be fully human is to live with others and be concerned for them as one is for

oneself. Therefore to be separated from this communal aspect of self, through rampant individualism, is to be alienated. This theme runs strongly through Marx's and Morris's works.

In this socialist 'total community', property is social rather than private, labour has dignity, humans are equal, and austerity, modesty and devotion to the public good are virtuous. 'Pure' socialism therefore argues for a cooperative, unhierarchical and secular *gemeinschaft*, which Marx called *gemeinwesen* (ultimate communism). And even today's social democracy, which is far from its socialist roots, defines the political agenda partly on this basis of collectivism and public good:

> The reality is that, despite the atomisation of industrial societies – the breakdown of traditional communities, the extension of labour mobility, household self-sufficiency – the modern era demands more, not less, collective decision making and cooperative action, whether to protect the environment . . . or combat global poverty.
>
> (Blackstone, Cornford, Hewitt and Miliband 1992).

By contrast, the radical right's *gemeinschaft* revolves around the notion of 'natural' laws binding people in an organic (slow changing) unity, and binding people to nature. The latter comes out particularly in the nationalist conception of intimate links between people and 'their' soil, landscape and folk traditions (Mosse 1982). Such links are romanticised in visions of pre-industrial medieval and 'traditional' societies. The idea of the community therefore grows out of the people; their locality and shared material existence. The source of authority is the general will, but since it is a natural hierarchy, that will is expressed through leaders. Both the bioregionalism of deep ecology (Chapter 4.5) and the utopian environmentalism of Goldsmith (1988) stress the need to re-establish such values of small-scale pre-industrial traditional societies. They go beyond rational expression, being articulated in nature mysticism, creative art, folk legend and paganism.

Liberals bow to the collective if they get something out of it for themselves. But they see human nature as *autonomous* – having standards and principles which are unique to the self (Benn 1982). Hence they do not regard the collectivity as something which soars above the sum total of selves, and will not accept collective mores without subjecting them to rational, critical and suspicious scrutiny. In Margaret Thatcher's infamous aphorism: 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families' (cited in the *Observer*, 27 December 1987).

So any concession to 'society' in the form of cooperation with its laws, morals, or economic and social arrangements, is predicated on strict reciprocity and mutuality. Liberals talk much of 'contracts', social and otherwise. People monitor their own behaviour towards others, and adjust it conditionally, depending on how others treat them. *Gesellschaft* is the minimalist conception of community which most people share in Western liberal, capitalist nations.